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ABSTRACT

This document outlines a course unit on Pre-Columbian Mayan Myths intended to be part of a semester-long survey course on world mythology. The intended unit length of three weeks for three hours per week allows time for consideration of a brief geographical, historical, and cosmological background against which to place Mayan myths, study of the principal Mayan deities, and a presentation of Mayan art reflecting Mayan mythology. Instructional activities, suggested student activities and reading assignments are included in this outline for each segment of the unit. A bibliography and a list of useful films and filmstrips is included. (JDS)

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PRE-COLUMBIAN MAYAN MYTHS

Project Mexico
June 26 - August 8

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JC 770 129

Project Mexico

Pre-Columbian Mayan Myths
Course Length--Three Weeks; three hours per week.
Level--Intended for community college level. No prerequisite.
Text--Mexican and Central American Mythology by Irene Nicholson.

Course Description

This unit on Pre-Columbian Mayan Myths is intended to be part of a semester-long survey course on world mythology. Therefore, by the time the student reaches this unit, he will have already dealt with an introduction to myth and myth theory (e.g., Jung, Eliade, Levi-Strauss, Campbell) and will have read several other mythologies and myth-inspired literature. By then, too, the student should be able to appropriately use such terms as "myth," "symbols," "archetype," and "collective unconscious." This previous study will serve the student as a point of reference and comparison as he looks at Mayan mythology. The course will consist of selected readings from Mexican and Central American Mythology, The Popol Vuh, the Annals of the Cakchiquels, and the Chilam Balam of Chumayel.

Objectives

A. To hear lectures and read teacher-prepared handouts on the cosmology, history, and culture of the Mayans with an emphasis on their contributions in astronomy, mathematics, writing, and art.

B. To read and discuss Mayan myths in terms of form and content.

C. To identify the principal deities and their function in Mayan life.

D. To examine the art of the Mayans as a reflection of their religious beliefs and cultural traditions.

E. To compare and contrast Mayan myths in terms of theme (e.g. creation) and principal deities with those mythologies studied earlier in the course.

F. To discuss the relevance of Mayan myths in our own times.

Rationale

The rationale for these objectives stems, in the broader sense, from a realization that mythology and its connection to literature, psychology, religion, anthropology, and art is enjoying a particularly strong renaissance at present. This approach to literature is being sought by many students today because it speaks so relevantly to their personal growth and development.

More specifically in regard to the study of Mayan mythology, it is hoped that the student will develop an appreciation of the high level of civilization of the Mayan people before Cortez; that the student will recognize the beauty and power of Mayan myths as pieces of literature; and that the student will see his own experiences reflected in the universality of the Mayan myths.

Class Activities

Lectures by the instructor and by guests
Group discussions
Assigned and independent reading
Slide presentations
Oral reports
Films

Week One

During this first week of the unit, I think it is important for the teacher to give the student a brief geographical, historical and cosmological background against which to place the Mayan myths. I would, therefore, use an overhead projector to enlarge a map of Mexico on the screen, pointing out to the student the Yucatan area where the various groups of mayas lived and the probable routes on migration from the north. For a good overview of Maya history and culture, I would suggest that the teacher consult The Maya by Michael Coe and Mexico Before Cortez by Ignacio Bernal. At this point I would also tell the students (or have them read) the Quetzalcoatl myth in their text, Mexican and Central American Mythology, pp. 78-93, describing Quetzalcoatl's birth, temptation, flight, and his predicted return. Explain that when Cortez first arrived in Mexico, he was mistaken for Quetzalcoatl because the date of his arrival coincided with the predicted date of Quetzalcoatl's return.

For a thorough treatment or Mayan cosmology, the teacher might consult The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization by Eric Thompson, Chapter Six, pp. 259-298. Thompson's most recent work, Maya History and Religion contains even more comprehensive material on Mayan cosmology in Chapter Six, pp. 159-196. More information can be found in Walter Krickeberg's Pre-Columbian American Religions, Chapter Two, pp. 60-82.

Week One

I. Who are the Mayans?

A. Brief overview of Mayan history and culture.

B. World view (cosmology) of the Mayans. See The Book of Chilam Balam, "The Return of the Four World Quarters," pp. 65-66.

C. Bibliographical references on Mayans.

D. Assign reading of the Introduction and Chapter One in Mexican and Central American Mythology by Nicholson.

E. Discussion of reading assignment.

II. Film: Sentinels of Silence surveys the ancient ruins of Mexico; or Maya of Ancient and Modern Yucatan which emphasizes that Mayan culture reached a richer stage of civilization than is generally recognized.

A. Introduce film with brief comments on archeological zones I visited in Mexico.

B. Show film.

C. Discuss the feeling and reaction provoked by the film.

D. Assign reading of creation myths in Mexican and Central American Mythology, pp. 56-64; 48-53.

III. Creation Myths

A. Read aloud to the class the myths in the Popol Vuh, Part I, Chapters 1-4, pp. 81-93.
Also read aloud "The Creation of the World" from the Chilam Balam, pp. 98-107.
Another selection that could be used here is from The Annals of the Cakchiquels, Part I, pp. 43-47.

B. Small group discussions of myths read.

1. What are the Mayans attempting to do through their myths?
2. What do these myths reveal about Mayan religious beliefs?
3. Compare and contrast them with creation myths read earlier in the course.

Week Two

It is difficult, for the purposes of classroom study and discussion, to separate or "extract" the Mayan gods from the total fabric of Mayan life, for their functions and influence were wide and varied, permeating every facet of Mayan existence. Not only did the gods create, maintain, and protect the earth and mankind, but they also governed the entire universe, the elements, and the animal kingdom; they held the power of life and death, and they presided over each day of the Calendar. For everything that was important to the Maya there was a deity in charge: gods of the Sun, Moon, Venus, maize, rain, wind, thunder, crops.

For an excellent discussion of the Maya pantheon, the instructor might consult Eric Thompson's Maya History and Religion. Chapter Seven, entitled "The Major Gods," contains a detailed explanation of the gods and their functions. Thompson stresses the importance of the dual aspect of the gods: that is, the gods could represent both good and evil; the masculine and the feminine; youth and old age. Other important aspects of Maya religion that Thompson discusses are the deification of time periods and calendar days; the duplication of functions of the gods, especially as alien influence was felt; the ability of the Maya deities to merge with alien gods; and the deification of ancestors.

Principal Deities

Hunab Ku: incorporeal and omnipotent

Itzamna: "Lizard House." Aged man with a Roman nose; inventor of writing and patron of learning and the sciences; the supreme deity.

Ix Chel: "Rainbow Lady." Wife of Itzamna. Old goddess of weaving, medicine, childbirth; perhaps even Moon Goddess. Equivalent to Coatlique, the Aztec mother of gods and men.

Ometeotl: god-goddess representing duality. The 13th rung of Heaven's ladder. All other gods, including Bacabs (who held up the word) are offspring of Itzamna and Ixchel.

Sun God: Ah Kinchil- similar to Itzamna; becomes Jaguar god (very fearsome).

Ix Chup: Moon Goddess; "The Woman"--perhaps consort of the Sun God.

Other celestial Deities were the North Stars and Venus. At the corners of the world were the benevolent Chacs, the Rain Gods manifested in thunder and lightning.

4 Bacabs: each presided over a quarter of the 260 day period in turn.

Hells: presided over by a number of sinister gods, especially Death known as Cumhau, Ah Puch, and Cizin.

Patrons of classes and professions: Kululcan--the god of the ruling caste-featured a serpent.

War gods were venerated by soldiers.

Ek Chuah: Black face, Pinocchio nose, the patron of marchants and cacao growers.

There were also patrons of poets, singers, dancers, lovers, and even suicides.

Week Two

I. Principal Deities

A. Give introductory background material on the Maya pantheon using Thompson's Maya History and Religion.

B. Assign reading from Mexican and Central American Mythology: "Four Aspects of Nature," pp. 94-111; "Some Female Deities," pp. 112-113; "The Ball Game," pp. 117-118; and "Maya Parallels with Nahua Gods," pp. 119-129.

C. Student oral reports from the Popol Vuh, Part II, pp. 107-164.

II. Slide presentation of deities selected from an assortment of slides taken at the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, museums in Oaxaca, and on my trip to Yucatan.

III. Optional writing assignment: the student may take one or more of the gods or goddesses from the Maya pantheon and write his own myth about them, using the information he has been given on Yucatecan geography and history as a setting. The student may prefer, however, to write his own modern myth explaining one of his values or beliefs.

Week Three

In this third week, the student might enjoy and profit from a lecture and slide presentation on Mayan art, much of which is inspired by the mythology. By this time, too, the student could participate in a discussion comparing Mayan mythology with the mythologies studied earlier in the course, noting parallels for the major gods, as well as similarities in theme (e.g., creation) and imagery (e.g., nature imagery).

Finally, the teacher might initiate a discussion of the impact of Mayan myths in this century. More specifically, do these myths hold any relevance for the student in his daily life? If so, in what way? If not, why?

Week Three

I. Guest lecturer: Bob Krieger from the Orange Coast College Art Department will speak on Mayan art, using the slides he took during a year's sabbatical in Yucatan.

II. Compare Mayan mythology with other mythologies studied in the course in terms of theme, deities, symbols and imagery.

III. Discuss the relevance of Mayan myths in the modern world and in the students' daily lives.

IV. Allow time for students to give reports they may have been preparing as optional assignments.

Suggested Activities

1. Field trip to nearest large city museum to Pre-Columbian art objects.

2. Students might want to illustrate the myths and share their work with the class.

3. Students might keep a journal recording their personal reaction to the myths read.

4. Students could prepare oral reports on:

   Chichen-Itza as a ceremonial center
   Mayan astronomy
   Mayan picture writing
   Olmec influence on Mayan culture
   Mayan ball game and its significance

Methods of Evaluation

1. Participation in class discussions.

2. Essay examination on Mayan cosmology, the function of the principal deities in the Mayan pantheon and points of comparison and contrast between Mayan myths and other world mythologies.

3. Participation in class activities: oral reports, field trips, illustrations of the myths, writing original versions of the myths.

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